6 Ways Your School PA System Is Letting You Down

Is your school's
communication system
up to date?

Decades-old technology is not up to the challenge of modern school communications

You probably **don't spend much time thinking about your public address system.** It's just part of the building you inherited from your predecessor. Like the lights. It's been there forever.

And that's the problem.

As each year passes, these aging systems are quietly draining school of resources while the demands on them are steadily increasing — from announcements to emergency communication.

Too costly to update your PA system?
Not urgent?
You might want to reconsider.

Unfortunately, in many schools these tools are obsolete, difficult to use, costly to manage, and they don't work together.

Whether it's changing bell schedules to accommodate an early dismissal day or alerting staff and students to an emergency, your PA, bell, and intercom systems are critical components for a safe, efficient school.

1 Your system is outdated

The U.S. Department of Education says over **24,000 schools' internal communication systems are in poor to fair condition.** [1]
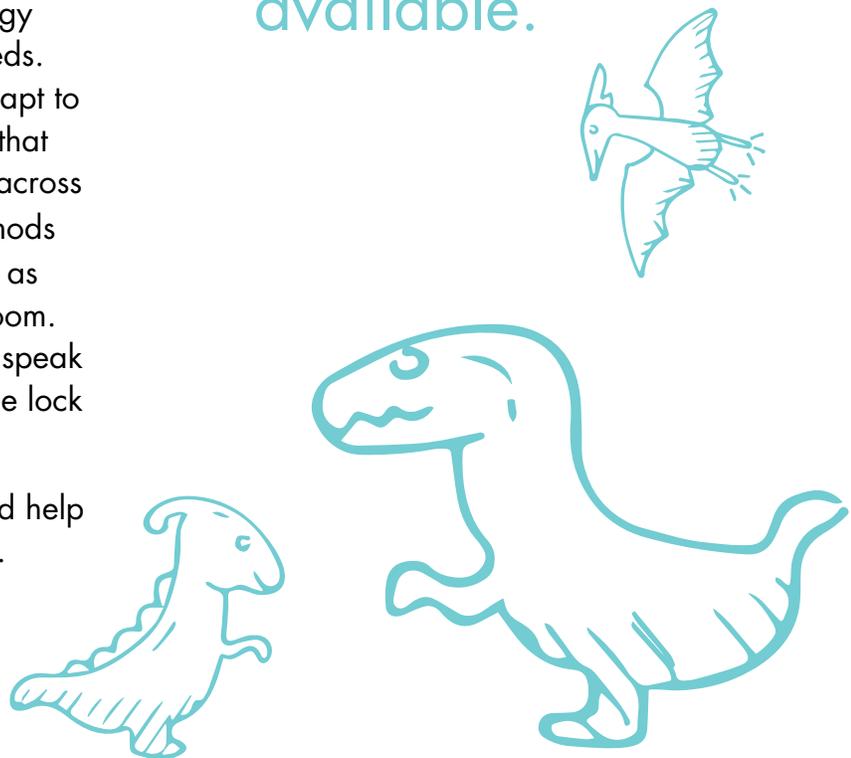
The analog technology that runs most paging, intercom and bell systems has remained essentially unchanged since the 1950s.

Would you replace your current phone system with an analog version? Of course not. So why use out-of-date analog technology for critical communication tools like your PA, intercom and bells?

Your school should not rely on old technology for your most important communication needs. Today's systems are flexible and able to adapt to your everyday needs. Many have features that make it easy and efficient to communicate across campus through traditional audio only methods – like the speakers in your ceiling – as well as visually, using digital displays in the classroom. At the push of a button, administrators can speak with any classroom or signal a campus-wide lock down until an emergency has passed.

Tools that you choose should be flexible and help make your schools safer and more efficient.

There are modern, sophisticated and –yes– even more affordable technologies available.

1   Alexander, D., and Lewis, L. (2014). Condition of America's Public School Facilities: 2012–13 (NCES 2014-022). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved August 6, 2016 from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch

2 Your tools are too restrictive

Does your classroom ownership ever get rearranged or reassigned? Of course they do. Schools today are dynamic. Last year's third-grade math classroom can now be a fifth-grade science classroom.

Switching classroom ownership should be easy – but with rigid, outdated systems, it's very difficult to make small changes, such as adjusting bell times, creating zone-specific bell schedules, creating and addressing zones within your PA system, and scheduling pre-recorded messages.

For example,

with old analog systems, announcing a departure time for the 5th grade field trip can mean disrupting learning in the entire school.

Adjusting bell times to accommodate a late start is arduous with most aging analog systems - if it's even possible.

Pre-recorded announcements are also difficult, leaving the principal tied to the PA system for morning announcements or emergency communication, rather than free to address student and staff needs.

Instead of creating clarity, a rigid communication system can create confusion with unintended interruptions for students and extra work for your already busy staff.

In contrast, modern, network-based communication platforms are flexible by design. A simple software interface lets you easily create as many zones as you need, reassign classroom ownership, have unlimited bell schedules and have the flexibility to address a single classroom, a specific zone, or the entire school.
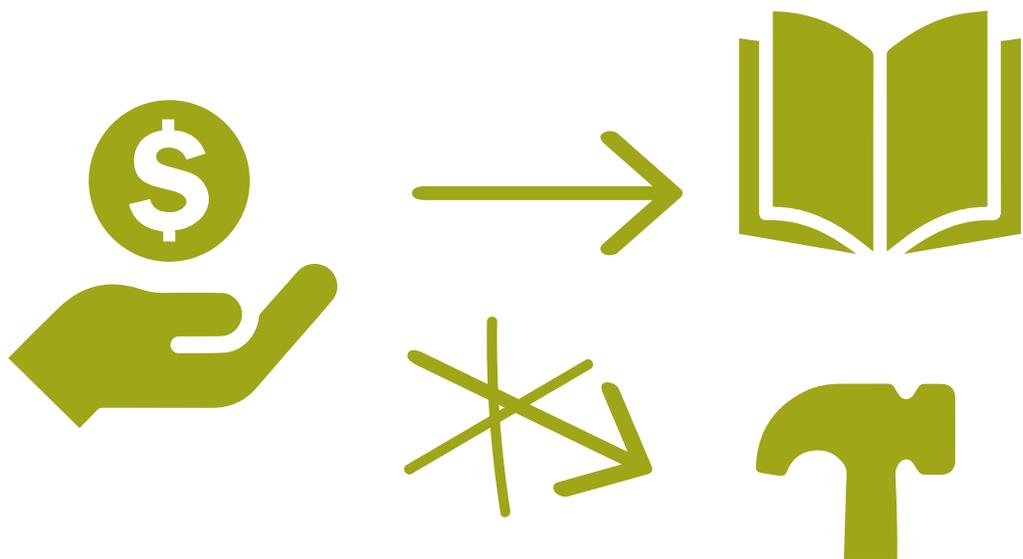
3 Simple changes require a costly technician

Even if your system accommodates changes – they usually aren't free.

Your current communication system is probably hardwired, and its designers almost certainly assumed an outside technician would be on-hand to make adjustments. Most systems were designed with the assumption that schools would have money for technicians to change anything from bell schedules, classroom ownership or paging zones. **Would you rather spend your budget on technicians or on things that impact teaching and learning?**

A modern, network-based communication system can be so flexible and easy to use that anyone on your staff can maintain and change bell schedules, classroom ownership, paging zones, pre-recorded messages, and much more **– without the extra cost of a technician visit.**

Your budget dollars should go to teaching and learning, not technicians

4 Disjointed and redundant

One system for bells, one for paging, hard-wired phones for intercom calls, a separate system for classroom audio – and none of it works together.

Technology that works in silos can cause headaches, costly redundancies and a management nightmare for your tech director or IT staff.

Does your LAN (local area network) cabling run alongside your analog paging wire? Do you have separate speakers for your classroom audio, bells, PA and intercom?
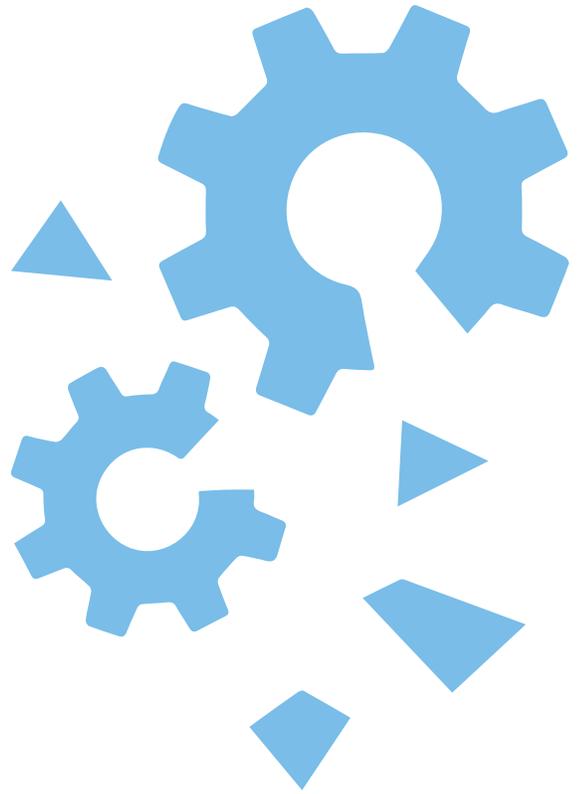
With a network-based communication system your LAN could easily support your paging system, so you don't have to carry the cost and support structure for two cabling systems.

And with a modern communication system you don't need multiple sets of speakers in your classrooms. **Your classroom sound systems can act as the PA, providing clear, digital sound.**

Some modern systems even feature stream prioritization to automatically ensure that bells override classroom audio, and emergency alerts and announcements override everything. These systems can also connect and control additional tools like remote door locks, projectors and HVAC systems giving you and your staff more control.

Schools can even save hundreds of dollars annually in energy consumption by using a modern system to schedule automatic shutdown of power hungry devices like projectors and desktop computers.
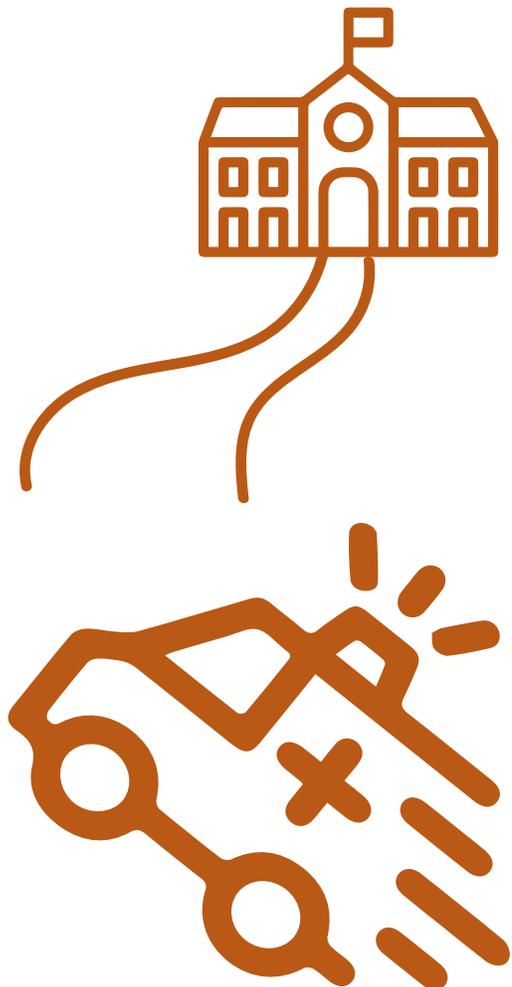
5 Your amplifier will stop working leaving you speechless

That huge analog amplifier that sits in a closet somewhere in your school is a communication crisis waiting to happen.

Unlike the computer network in your school, there probably isn't a designated team of professionals monitoring your amplifier and the rest of your analog communications system. This task likely falls to your grounds manager.

Unfortunately, the day your analog amplifier stops working
— and it will —
key communication will be cutoff.

Don't wait until you're in a crisis situation to realize your critical communications tools are insufficient. Modern network-based communication platforms can be monitored easily and won't leave you without a voice when you need one.

6 It leaves students and staff vulnerable in an emergency

The Educator's School Safety Network reports that "In just one day – May 23, 2016 – there were bomb threats in more than 53 schools in 18 states. At least half of these were elementary schools."[2] With threats like these looming, schools need communication systems that allow for swift action and clear communication during an emergency so you can get everyone to safety quickly.

With outdated communication systems, alerts may not be triggered quickly, or provide clear, accurate instruction to guide students and staff.

Relying on outdated and separate bell, paging, intercom and emergency alert systems costs your school money, wastes valuable time and unfortunately can create chaos, confusion and danger during emergency situations. When every second counts, clear communication during an emergency is paramount to keeping students and staff safe.

Schools need systems that can:

- Allow alerting from both fixed and mobile devices from various staff members in any location that can trigger pre-recorded audio warnings and instructions

- Control digital signage with announcements and directions

- Email messages and text messages to staff and parents

- Lock doors

- Initiate strobe lights

- Alert emergency responders when needed

2   Amy Klinger and Amanda Klinger, (2016) Bomb Incidents in Schools: An Analysis of 2015-2016 School Year October 2015 – January 2016 Edition. The Educator's School Safety Network

These common issues should not be your problems anymore

Many school administrators and IT managers share these dilemmas regarding school communication system:

- *"We were at a point that we actually had to contract someone out to come and change all of our bells,"*

- *"We are in an environment where safety is a priority for us. We want to make sure we have the ability to talk to our kids, talk to our staff, in case of an emergency or just on a daily basis on a regular routine,"*

from interview with Mario Millan,
Richgrove California School Superintendent

2-Minute Video: Is Your Campus Communication Stuck in the Past?

1960s technology isn't up to 21st Century demands. Many school buildings are still relying on decades-old 70V analog technology to communicate with students and teachers.

Solution checklist below:

Use this checklist to help you choose a communication system that helps keep everyone informed and safe.

Ease of use:

☐ Is it easy to integrate with existing systems you use?

☐ Does it provide an user-friendly interface to program the system so that you can use, manage, update and modify it easily?

Efficiency:

☐ Is the system network-based to avoid duplicate wiring and installation labor?

☐ Is it cost-effective?

During emergencies, does it:

☐ Triggers action and response through the existing classroom audio system?

☐ Have integrated communication technology between classroom audio, paging/bell and safety system for quick response in case of an emergency?

Make school life easier and safer with FrontRow Conductor.

"For us it was a no brainer, it was the way to make sure our kids were safe and that they had all the most current information that they needed for that moment."

- Mario Millan, Richgrove California School Superintendent

"We are using it to make our school lives easier. It allows us to set bell schedules, welcoming and dismissing chimes and tones, as well as communicate directly with individual classrooms and the whole school. It was quick to learn, really intuitive, and it's just a really useful tool. "

"Everybody's comfort level with technology is different. What's been great about FrontRow is that it's incredibly user-friendly."

- Michael Wong, Piedmont Attendance Secretary

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